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King County charter review panel resists sheriff's request for bargaining power

By Keith Ervin
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The King County Charter Review Commission has tentatively



Sue Rahr argues she can't be accountable for training and discipline without the authority.

Charter meetings

The King County Charter Review Commission will hold four public meetings on its draft recommendations:

- Tuesday, 6:30 p.m., The Hall at Fauntleroy, 9131 California Ave. S.W., Seattle
- Thursday, 6:30 p.m., Shoreline Center, 18560 First Ave. N.E., Shoreline
- April 14, 6:30 p.m. Preston Community Center, 8625 310th Ave. S.E., Issaquah
- April 15, 6:30 p.m., RiverRock Grill and Ale House, 4050 Maple Valley Highway, Renton

For more information, including the commission's draft report and recommendations: [http://www.kingcounty.gov/](http://www.kingcounty.gov/exec/charter.aspx)

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rejected Sheriff Sue Rahr's request that she be given authority to negotiate working conditions with her employees.

Instead, the commission has drafted a charter amendment directing the county executive to consult with the sheriff on collective-bargaining goals and, if the executive doesn't pursue those goals, to provide a written explanation.

That doesn't differ greatly from the existing practice, in which Executive Ron Sims' bargaining team consults with Rahr but has full authority to negotiate pay, benefits and working conditions with the sheriff's deputies union, the King County Police Officers Guild.

Lois North, co-chair of the commission that is set up once every 10 years to review the county charter, said she was sympathetic to Rahr's argument that she can't be held accountable for training and discipline of her deputies if she isn't allowed to handle the noneconomic side of contract talks.

But North, a former King County Council member and an author of the 1969 county charter, said, "I also understand that the executive has to have the budgetary control. He has to manage the thing. I think what we've come up with is language that gives the sheriff more of a voice without disturbing the unity of the county executive."

Resolving Rahr's dispute with Sims was the most difficult and controversial issue the Charter Review Commission considered, according to North and co-chair and former Gov. Mike Lowry. The panel has drafted 13 proposed charter amendments that would give more attention to unincorporated areas, increase protection of county-owned open space and make it more difficult for citizens to initiate changes to the charter.

A series of public meetings will be held this month on the draft recommendations. After considering public comments, the 21-member commission will make its final recommendations to the council in May. The County Council will decide which, if any, amendments to put on the ballot this year or next.

The commission did not consider a perennial issue — making the council and executive nonpartisan offices — because that is the subject of a citizen initiative that turned in more than 80,000 petition signatures Tuesday.

The commission's draft report proposes to double the number of signatures required to put a charter-amendment initiative on the ballot. Since the state Supreme Court ruled in 2003 that citizens have the right to initiate amendments, the county has required the same number of petition signatures as required to put proposed ordinances on the ballot: 10 percent of voter turnout in the previous county-executive election.

The commission proposes to require 20 percent, or 105,634 signatures based on the 2005 executive race. "When you're amending your constitution you ought to have a high bar. We're talking about the constitution of the county," Lowry said.

Other draft charter amendments would:

- Require a vote of the people before the county can sell land or development rights on more than 100,000 acres of certain parks, natural areas and commercial forest land.
- Direct the executive to appoint a "senior official" to oversee services provided to parts of the county that aren't in cities.
- Give the County Council an additional 20 days to review the executive's proposed budget.
- Clarify that the executive's appointments of Charter Review Commission members must be confirmed by the council.
- Prohibit sexual-orientation discrimination in county employment and contracting.

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